

THE AUK:

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF

ORNITHOLOGY.

VOL. XVIII.

OCTOBER, 1901.

No. 4.

AN ORNITHOLOGICAL MYSTERY.

BY WILLIAM BREWSTER.

“Even yet thou art to me
No bird: but an invisible Thing,
A Voice, a mystery.” — *Wordsworth.*

IN these days of multitudinous bird observers, when so many of the questions that both perplexed and stimulated the students of twenty-five or thirty years ago have been set finally at rest, it is refreshing to happen on an ornithological mystery; one, moreover, possessing no slight interest and importance since it concerns a bird which is known to the ornithologists of eastern Massachusetts, as the Cuckoo was to Wordsworth, *only by its voice.*

At about six o'clock on the afternoon of June 7, 1889, I heard in Cambridge, among the dense beds of cat-tail flags which surround Pout Pond, some bird notes, rail-like in character but wholly new to me. They proved equally so to Mr. Walter Faxon and Mr. Bradford Torrey, whom I took to the place later that same evening. Together we listened to the bird for upward of an hour during which he was rarely silent for more than a minute or two at a time. As we were unable to obtain any clue to his identity, and as his song invariably began with a series of *kick-kicks* we christened him the ‘Kicker’ by which name he has since been known among the Cambridge ornithologists.

✓ For identification of the song as that of the male Virginia Rail,
see Reynard and Hardy, *Cassina*, *Auk* (1901), p. 63. Nov., 1901, p. 3-8.

In the course of the following fortnight, most of which Mr. Faxon and I devoted to searching for 'Kickers,' two more birds were heard in another part of the Fresh Pond Swamps, two in the meadows bordering Beaver Brook (one near the Waverly Oaks, the other in Rock Meadow, Belmont), one on the edge of Great Meadow, East Lexington, three in the Neponset River meadows near Readville, one on the banks of the Sudbury River just above Concord, and *five* in a meadow near the mouth of West Brook in Sudbury.

Most of the birds just mentioned were in very wet meadows or swamps, either among the wild grasses which grow so luxuriantly in such places, or in beds of tall rushes or cat-tail flags. We sometimes heard them in the early forenoon or late afternoon and once or twice at high noon, when the sun was shining brightly. As a rule, however, they did not begin calling before sunset and were seldom in full cry until twilight had fallen, after which their notes were uttered almost incessantly, at short, regular intervals, certainly far into the night and probably up to daybreak the next morning. From this it will appear that their haunts were similar to those of the Carolina and Virginia Rails and their periods of greatest activity to an even larger degree, nocturnal.

Their voices, also, were unmistakably rail-like. Their notes varied considerably in number — as well as somewhat in form and quality — not only with different birds but with the same individual at different times. The commonest forms were as follows: —

Kik-kik-kik, quèeah.

Kik-kik-kik, ki-quèeah.

Kik-ki-ki-ki, ki-quèeah.

Kìc-kìc, kic-kic, kic-kic, kic-kic, ki-quèeah.

The *kic-kic* notes were very like those which the Virginia Rail uses to call together her scattered young, but they were at least thrice as loud. Although usually given in rather rapid succession they were sometimes divided by distinct if short intervals (indicated above by commas) into groups of twos or occasionally of threes. These pauses gave them the effect of being uttered with a certain degree of hesitancy or in a tentative spirit, as if the bird were clearing its throat or attuning its voice to exactly the right pitch before venturing on what was evidently his supreme

effort, the terminal *quèeah*. This note, which might perhaps be as well rendered by *quèer*, or even simply *kèeer*, and which was occasionally doubled and sometimes wholly omitted, formed the only really characteristic and at all times unmistakable part of the song. It was a shrill, slightly tremulous squeal or crow, given with exceeding emphasis and vigor and reminding us by turns of the rolling chirrup which a chipmunk makes just as he dives into his hole, of the sudden outcry of a half-grown chicken when it is pecked by one of its companions, or of the crow of a young rooster. Near at hand it seemed louder than the *kic-kic* notes but the latter carried much the further — sometimes to a distance of fully half-a-mile when the air was damp and still — whereas the crow, under the most favorable conditions, could not be heard at more than half that distance.

That the notes just described constitute what, from the standpoint of the ornithologist, must be regarded as a true song seems obvious from the fact that they were uttered at such frequent and regular intervals, often for hours at a time. Indeed, the bird when engaged in producing them could not well have found opportunity for doing anything else. It is probable, however, that he often changed his position during his brief periods of silence, for his voice varied more or less in intensity or volume with successive utterances, the increase and decrease in volume being usually graduated but sometimes rather abrupt. Ordinarily every fourth or fifth repetition came especially loud and full but occasionally a particularly distinct utterance immediately succeeded an exceptionally faint one. Perhaps the bird while singing faced in different directions, making a quarter turn after each series of calls, as the Woodcock does while peeping; or he may have been merely running about in the grass calling at times in open spaces, at others among or beneath herbage sufficiently dense to muffle the sound of his voice. The general effect of his song, while certainly far from musical, was not displeasing and the terminal crow had a delightfully merry or rather joyous quality as if the bird, reveling in the rare June weather amid the lush grass of his favorite meadows, were altogether too happy to contain himself. Indeed, there were times when this note, rising above the croaking of innumerable frogs and the rustling of wind among the reeds, sounded like a shrill, exultant little cheer.

Needless to say we spared no efforts to get a sight of the bird while he was singing in the early evening twilight or, sometimes with the aid of a keen-nosed dog, to flush him by day from the rank vegetation of his difficult haunts, but all such attempts proved futile; and when his singing season waned and finally came to its close, about the end of June, we had obtained no definite evidence as to his identity.

So far as we know the 'Kicker' has never since returned to any of the localities above mentioned but I noted one at Falmouth, Massachusetts, in 1890, and in the extensive marshes opposite my camp on the Concord River (about two miles below the town centre of Concord) one was singing on the evening of June 22, 1892, and another nearly every evening from May 18 to June 12, 1898; while I heard at least three and I think four different birds in these meadows during the last week of June, 1901.

The Falmouth bird began singing shortly after sunset on June 25, near a house at which I had arrived late that afternoon. Whenever I was awake during the following night his merry little crow came distinctly to my ears through the open windows of my room, at the usual short, regular intervals. On the previous evening I had traced the sound to its source, and by a rough process of triangulation had fixed the position of the bird at about the centre of a fresh water meadow that lay just behind the beach ridge in the bottom of a bowl-shaped hollow surrounded by sandy, upland fields and pastures. Early the next morning I examined the place more carefully. The meadow scarce exceeded an acre in extent. Most of it was comparatively dry, and having been burned over the previous autumn or winter was covered only by a short and rather sparse growth of young grass but the course of a sluggish brook and the edges of some intersecting ditches which imperfectly drained it had escaped the fire and were bordered by fringes of tall grasses, weeds and cat-tail flags, representing the growths of several successive seasons. These belts of cover, although dense enough to be impervious to the eye, were so very narrow that it was an easy matter to search them thoroughly and I soon satisfied myself that they sheltered no nest of any kind, not even a sparrow's; after which I turned my attention to the open ground. I had scarce begun to scan attentively its level,

brilliantly green surface when I saw, only a few paces away, a light yellowish object which I took, at first, to be the crown of an old straw hat, but which, on nearer inspection, proved to be a nest unlike any that I had ever before found. It was a domed structure, somewhat resembling that made by our field mouse but flatter and broader. The materials, also, were coarser and more skilfully and substantially put together, being firmly interwoven about the edges with the stems of the surrounding grasses. The dome was composed wholly of the stalks and blades of coarse grasses, perfectly dry and bleached to a dull yellowish hue. I examined this nest for some time before I could discover its entrance, for the slightly arched top seemed at first to unite everywhere with the sides and bottom. But by stooping low I at length detected in the side towards the east a circular hole of about the size of that made by our Downy Woodpecker, and sheltered above by a sort of hood which projected out over it from the edge of the dome. Leading directly to this opening was a well-worn run-way over which, for a distance of five or six inches from the nest, the short living grasses had been bent down and loosely intertwined so as to form an effective yet inconspicuous screen. On still closer examination I found that the nest was certainly that of some bird, for the interior was roomy and carefully finished while the bottom had that unmistakable saucer shape common to most birds' nests. The lining was of coarse, dry grass blades neatly and smoothly arranged. Apparently the structure was only just completed for it was quite empty and there were no signs to indicate that it had ever contained eggs or young.

Mr. Faxon saw it *in situ* a few days later. I kept it under close observation for a week or more but although I was careful not to disturb it, even by tramping down the grass by which it was surrounded, it must have been deserted immediately after my first visit for no eggs were laid in it. Nor was the 'Kicker' heard again in that locality. He was the only bird of any kind that I found in or near the meadow, which, by the way, was overrun by cats and dogs belonging to houses in the immediate neighborhood. No doubt some of these animals either killed or drove away both him and his mate.

Thus much for the history of a case which, in respect to its difficulties, is without parallel in the experience of those of us who have been engaged in its investigation. In formulating the inferences which its consideration suggests, I shall endeavor to keep well within limits justified by the evidence which, although largely of a circumstantial or even purely negative character, is, nevertheless, not without its value and significance.

In the first place the habits, haunts and especially the voice of the 'Kicker' indicate that he is a Rail of some kind. He cannot be either the Carolina or Virginia Rail for Mr. Faxon and I have been long familiar with all the sounds regularly made by these birds. Moreover, the 'Kicker' has been heard in the Fresh Pond Swamps during one season only, while the Carolina and Virginia Rails are abundant there every summer. The only other Rails known or likely to occur in summer in the fresh water marshes of southern New England are the King and the Little Black Rails.¹ The notes of the King Rail, as described by those who have heard them in the Southern or Mississippi Valley States, are wholly unlike those of our 'Kicker.' Robinson, as quoted by Gosse, in 'Birds of Jamaica' (1847, p. 376), says of the Little Black Rail:—"The negroes in Clarendon call it *Cacky-quaw*, by reason of its cry, which consists of three articulations; the negroes in Westmoreland call it *Johnny Ho*, and *Kitty Go* for the same reason." He also says that two birds which were brought to him alive gave a "very low" cry which "resembled that of a Coot, when at a great distance." Mr. March, on the other hand, states (Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci. Phila., 1864, p. 69) that the Jamaica bird utters a "*chi-chi-cro-croo-croo* several times repeated in sharp, high-toned notes, and heard at a considerable distance." None of our 'Kicker's' utterances so much as even suggest "*Cacky-quaw*," "*Johnny Ho*" or "*Kitty Go*"; but his *kic-kic-kic*, *ki quèeah* is not very unlike Mr. March's rendering, and when we consider the local variations to which the notes of so many species of birds are subject, it seems not improbable that the songs of the Little Black Rails which inhabit Jamaica may

¹ There are no good reasons for suspecting that the Yellow Rail ever breeds in any part of New England.

be more or less different from those of the birds which occur in the United States.

Reverting once more to the nest found at Falmouth, I do not hesitate to assert that almost without question it was built by a Rail of some kind. Its position, its component materials, the general character of its construction, and above all, the cleverly concealed run-way by which the birds approached and left it, all point plainly to such an assumption. If this be granted the final conclusion that the nest belonged to the Little Black Rail is inevitable. The small size of the entrance hole and run-way leaves, indeed, no room for doubt on this point. Moreover, the nest, in every essential respect, was apparently closely similar to the nest of the Little Black Rail which Mr. J. N. Clark found at Saybrook, Connecticut, as well as to the one examined by Mr. E. W. Nelson in Illinois.

Of the Saybrook nest Mr. Clark says:—“ This nest was situated about forty rods back from the shore of the river, on the moist meadow, often overflowed by the spring tides. The particular spot had not been mowed for several years, and the new grass, springing up through the old, dry, accumulated growths of previous years, was thick, short, and not over eight or ten inches in height . . . The nest after the complement of eggs were deposited in it resembled that of the common Meadow Lark, it consisting of fine meadow grasses loosely put together, with a covering of the standing grasses woven over it and a passage and entrance at one side.” (Clark, *Auk*, I, October, 1884, p. 394).

Mr. Nelson's nest “ was placed in a deep cup-shaped depression in a perfectly open situation on the border of a marshy spot, and its only concealment was such as a few straggling *caries* afforded. It is composed of soft grass blades loosely interwoven in a circular manner. The nest, in shape and construction, looks much like that of a meadow lark.” (Nelson, *Birds N. E. Ill.*, Bull. Essex Ins., VIII, p. 134).

It is undeniable, however, that the evidence relating to the Falmouth nest fails to establish any certain connection between its original owner and the ‘Kicker.’ That the two were really one and the same seems probable enough but the identity of the ‘Kicker’ cannot be regarded as definitely established until some-

one, more fortunate than Mr. Faxon and I have been, succeeds either in shooting or in getting a good view of the bird while it is in the act of uttering its characteristic notes. On the whole I am glad, rather than the reverse, to be compelled to leave the matter thus unsettled for I should not like to feel that even so thoroughly worked a region as that immediately about Cambridge is wholly without the charm which attends all mysteries.

NESTING HABITS OF THE ANATIDÆ IN NORTH DAKOTA.

BY A. C. BENT.

Plates IV-VI.

From photographs by the author.

I SPENT the last few days of May and the first half of June of the present year, accompanied by Rev. Herbert K. Job, of Kent, Conn., and part of the time, by Dr. Louis B. Bishop, of New Haven, Conn., in the lake region of central North Dakota, principally in the vicinity of Devils Lake, along the Sheyenne River to the southward, through Nelson County and in Steele County. The prairie region naturally comprises by far the greater part of, in fact, nearly all, of the territory covered by our observations. Throughout the eastern portion of North Dakota, particularly in the Red River Valley, where the land is flat and level, and in Steele County, we found the prairie under complete cultivation and sown with wheat or flax wherever the land was level enough or dry enough for the purpose. In these farming districts the meadow lands, too wet for cultivation, were generally mowed for hay. In many cases sloughs and small pond holes were drained for irrigation purposes or to make meadow land; so that bird life was confined to the larger sloughs, the tree claims, and the occasional strips of uncultivated prairie. Farther west, from Nelson County westward, there is much less cultivated land and the wild rolling land of the virgin prairie is only here and there broken by farms with a few hundred acres of wheat fields surrounding each farmhouse. Here we could drive for miles over the un-